



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

News Release

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Serial identity thief sentenced to more than four years following ICE probe *Defendant targeted mailboxes of King and Snohomish County residents*

KENT, Wash. – A Burien woman has been sentenced to 57 months in state prison and ordered to pay restitution after admitting her role in an identity theft scheme primarily targeting residents of King and Snohomish Counties.

Tabitha Watkins, 36, pleaded guilty July 21 in King County Superior Court to state charges of receiving stolen property, identity theft, and forgery. The plea follows a 10-month investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in coordination with the Clyde Hill Police Department and the United States Attorney's Office.

In court documents, King County prosecutors alleged Watkins obtained credit card information on more than 20 people and businesses in the area, but during the investigation, ICE agents recovered fraudulent identity documents linked to Watkins bearing the names of more than 200 different individuals.

ICE became involved in the case in September 2005 after Watkins attempted to enter the Seattle Federal Building carrying a supply of marijuana and was arrested by ICE officers assigned to the Federal Protective Service. At the time, Watkins presented false identification claiming to be another person.

Subsequently, ICE agents contacted several local law enforcement agencies and determined that the defendant was the subject of more than a dozen identity theft investigations throughout western Washington. After conferring with the United States Attorney's Office and the King County Prosecutor's Office, ICE coordinated its investigation with local authorities. Rather than face possible federal prosecution on aggravated identity theft charges, which carry a mandatory two-year prison term, the defendant agreed to plead guilty to state identity theft charges and accept the 57-month sentence.

"Identity theft poses a serious security vulnerability and contributes to a host of other types of crimes, including financial fraud," said Scott Hunt an ICE special agent based in Seattle. "ICE is working closely with its federal and local law enforcement partners to target those who jeopardize our nation's security to satisfy their own greed."

As part of the investigation, in December 2005, ICE agents executed federal search warrants at two residences in the Seattle area, seizing hundreds of fake identification documents as well as several computers used to make those documents. According to an affidavit filed in support of those search warrants, a witness reported that, over a six-month period beginning in June 2005, she observed Watkins create fraudulent identity documents on a computer using a desktop publishing program. In March 2006, Watkins was arrested on state identity theft and forgery charges.

ICE agents say Watkins gathered information on many of her victims using a ploy called “mail boxing,” taking credit card bills, checks, and other sensitive materials from the victims’ mail boxes. In one instance, Watkins stole books of newly printed checks sent to a Bellevue woman and used them to create a new identity and make \$11,000 in purchases. The defendant told investigators for the Kent police department that she used skills gained while pursuing a college computer science degree to help create the false IDs.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.